DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 436 459 SO 031 142

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| AUTHOR | Sarma, Valts |
| TITLE | Civic Education in Latvia's Transition to Democracy. |
| PUB DATE | 1998-10-08 |
| NOTE | 12p.; Paper presented at the International Conference on Engagement in Political and Civic Life: Citizenship in Twenty-First Century Democracies (Valley Forge, PA, October 4-9, 1998). |
| PUB TYPE | Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150) |
| EDRS PRICE | MF01/PC01 Plus Postage. |
| DESCRIPTORS | *Citizenship Education; Civics; Cooperative Programs; *Democracy; Foreign Countries; Government Role; Grade 8; Grade 9; International Programs; Junior High Schools; Nongovernmental Organizations; *Partnerships in Education; Political Issues |
| IDENTIFIERS | *CIVITAS; *Latvia |

ABSTRACT

Since the restoration of Latvian independence in 1991 the issues of citizenship for non-Latvians and civic participation for all the people of Latvia have become acute. The paper provides statistical data on Latvia and states that, politically, Latvia is a parliamentary system of representative democracy that is directly accountable to the citizens. The paper then discusses the Democracy Advancement Center (DAC), a leading civic organization (non-governmental), which maintains cooperation with the Ministry of Education. It focuses on materials the DAC has designed and developed for a new course in civic education at the eighth and ninth grades, discussing key ideas about the subject matter, teaching methods, and intended learners of the new civic education program. The paper also considers DAC's international partnerships, especially those with agencies and colleagues in the United States, such as Civitas: An International Civics Education Exchange Program. Contains 5 references. (BT)

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ED 436 459

# Civic Education in Latvia's Transition to Democracy

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October 8, 1998

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This paper was presented to the International Conference on Engagement in Political Civic Life: Citizenship in Twenty-First Century Democracies at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, October 4-9, 1998. This conference was conducted by the Center for Civic Education at Calabasas, California, U.S.A. and the Federal Center for Political Education of the Federal Republic of Germany.



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**Civic Education in Latvia's Transition to Democracy**

**By Valts Sarma**

- **Introduction**

Since the restoration of independence of Latvia in 1991, the issues of citizenship for non-Latvians and civic participation for all the people of Latvia have become acute. These issues must be considered within the socio-cultural context of Latvia. Some statistical data on Latvia are presented below:

- The territory of Latvia is 64,410 square kilometers.
- The population of Latvia is about 2,500,000.
- The number of citizens is approximately 1,770,000 of which 79% are Latvians.
- The number of registered aliens and stateless persons is approximately 720,000.

Politically Latvia is a parliamentary system of representative democracy that is directly accountable to the citizens.

Recent statistics show that very few Russian speaking people of the age from 17 to 30 years plan to apply for Latvian citizenship. Only one-fourth of all respondents in this group plan to obtain citizenship. Their most usual responses are: "don't need it", "don't feel myself as a part of this country", "it is not important to vote", "don't want to serve in military forces". We can say that these are responses of the people who feel themselves disappointed and alienated from the Latvian society and culture.

There is a troubling fact that three fourths of all Latvians and 90 percent of non-Latvians are not members of any political or social organizations. They tend to be connected only to their

families, but not to involve themselves in social activities. Respondents mostly do not have trust in government agencies (only 20 to 25% trust them). Instead, they tend to have confidence in non-governmental organizations.

Many Latvians have had little opportunity to develop resources necessary for effective democratic participation. The majority of respondents say that the basis for democracy is economic well-being. But the economy must be improved to yield necessary resources.

Responses are different by educational level. More educated people tend to emphasize democratic citizenship because they understand the importance of it. This leads us directly to citizenship education and its status in Latvia now.

## 2. The Democracy Advancement Center and Implementation of Civics in Latvia

Throughout the 1990s, Latvians have used civic education in their schools to advance their country's transition to democracy and strengthen its links to Europe and the West.

One of the Latvian educational system goals has been to educate Latvia's youth about the concept of democracy, the meaning of human rights, responsibilities of the citizen in a democracy, the mechanisms of a democratic government (with emphasis on the government of Latvia), the role of government in a democratic society, key laws of Latvia and it's constitution, and the principles of a market economy. The Ministry of Education and other governmental institutions were not able to provide curricular materials. So they sought assistance from non-governmental organizations. Educational non-governmental organizations are still developing most of the teaching materials.

An example of successful cooperation between the Ministry of Education and a non-governmental organization is The Democracy Advancement Center (DAC). The DAC is Latvia's

leading civic education organization. Located at the Ministry of Education in Riga, it is a non-governmental organization dedicated to developing materials and methods for teaching democratic citizenship governance. Since 1995, the center has been a partner of the Social Studies Development Center of Indiana University in Civitas: An International Civic Education Exchange Program. What were the origins of the Democracy Advancement Center, and what has it achieved?

Recognizing the close connection between well-educated citizens and democratic well being, many Latvians have decided that reform of the curricula and teaching methods of their schools is at least as important as restoring their constitution of 1922 and reconstructing their political system. As a result, they have acted quickly to replace Soviet-era courses on citizenship with courses on a genuine constitutional democracy. They looked to the West for help, which came initially from the World Federation of Free Latvians, an international organization that nurtured the spirit of national independence and liberty during the long and harsh Soviet occupation of their homeland.

The Democracy Advancement Center was founded in 1993 with support from the American Latvian Association, a component of the World Federation of Free Latvians. Funds to support the DAC were granted by the National Endowment for Democracy, an agency of the federal government of the United States. The current director of the DAC is Valts Sarma.

Since 1994, the Democracy Advancement Center has designed and developed materials for a new course in civic education at the eighth and ninth grades. Key ideas about the subject matter, teaching methods, and intended learners of the new civic education program are discussed below.

The course's content emphasizes the interactions between citizens and their constitutional government. There are lessons on the Latvian constitution, institutions of government, and rights and responsibilities of citizens. But civic education also involves the society in which government functions, thus there are lessons on the family, education institutions, social groups, and the economy. In particular, the relationship of civil society to democratic governance is stressed, because there can be no democratic governance if the society in general is not democratic. Finally, there are lessons on international relations, so that Latvian citizens will understand how they are connected to various regions and peoples of the world.

The method of teaching used in this new curriculum emphasizes active learning instead of the passive reception of information. Lessons require students to acquire and apply information and ideas rather than merely receive and repeat them. They are challenged to use higher-level cognitive operations involved in the organization, interpretation, and evaluation of subject matter. Various kinds of group work, such as role playing exercises, simulations, and political problem solving tasks, are used to teach skills of democratic participation and decision making. These active teaching methods are most compatible with the educational goal of developing knowledge and skills necessary for effective and responsible citizenship in a constitutional democracy.

In the development of curricula and instructional materials, the DAC recognizes that intellectual and participatory skills and processes are inseparable from particular knowledge, and that some ideas and facts are more significant or valuable than others. Thus, their classroom lessons conjoin basic content on principles and practices of democracy with fundamental cognitive and participatory processes and skills to enable students to learn content and processes simultaneously.

It is fundamentally important to emphasize civic education in the primary schools. Ideally, teaching and learning civics begins in the earliest grades so that children acquire a firm foundation of knowledge about democracy and citizenship. The DAC staff is actively involved in promoting democratic civic education in the lower-primary grades. Given limited resources, however, the DAC decided that the greatest effect could be achieved by concentrating its efforts at the upper-primary level–grades eight and nine. At this point, a formal course in civic education could be required of al fifteen- and sixteen-year-old students, thereby exposing them to the knowledge and skills of democratic citizenship before they finish compulsory schooling.

The educational ideas described above have guided the development of all curricular materials published by the DAC. These materials include a teacher handbook on civics, a student workbook on civics, a textbook for ninth-grade students of civics, and a book on democratic teaching methods. These materials are used throughout Latvia in teacher education workshops and classrooms. In 1996, the civics textbook was made available to all ninth-grade students in Latvia. Developers of this civics textbook include Guntars Catlaks, Valts Sarma, Aija Tuna, Gints Apals, and Vija Rudina. Materials developed by the DAC are published in Latvian and Russian to reach the maximum number of teachers and students in Latvia.

From the beginning, DAC staff members considered the education of teachers a critical component of their work. Unless teachers understand the content and pedagogy of civic education for democracy, the DAC's mission will be unfulfilled. Thus, since 1994, the DAC has conducted more than two hundred seminars and workshops for teachers in schools throughout Latvia. More than two thousand teachers have participated in these programs, which are based on the lessons and teaching methods of the teacher handbook and student workbook published by

DAC.

A complimentary component of the teacher training for civic education has been directed to pre-service education at colleges and universities. In 1994, a special one-semester course in civics was developed by a member of the DAC, Professor Arijs Orlovskis, for students at Liepaja Pedagogical University. In 1995, Professor Liesma Lapina of the Riga Academy of Pedagogy instituted a one-semester course in civics for students preparing to be teachers. In 1996, this course in civics for the education of teachers was offered for the first time at Daugavpils Pedagogical College under the direction of Professor Irena Saleniece. Thus, as of 1996, civic education had become part of teacher education at three major pedagogical institutions in Latvia. The DAC will attempt to influence other teacher education programs in the curricula of pedagogical institutions.

In its short life, since 1993, the DAC has been very productive in promoting civic education for democracy in Latvia. Its mission, though well begun, is far from finished. Present and future challenges include further promotion and development throughout Latvian society of the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are necessary for effective and responsible citizenship in the constitutional democracy of the Republic of Latvia.

The latest development of Civic education is implementation of Project Citizen in Latvia. First 5,000 copies of this material were printed and distributed free of charge in Latvian schools. First National competition of Project Citizen is planned in the year 1999.

**3. DAC's International Partnerships: Cross-Cultural Achievements and Lessons**

From its inception, the Democracy Advancement Center has been involved in international and cross-cultural relationships, especially with agencies and colleagues from the United States.

DAC staff and associates have traveled to the United States to work with civic educators at the Social Studies Development Center of Indiana University, directed by John J. Patrick; the Center for Civic Education in Calabasas, California, directed by Charles N. Quigley; and the Council for Citizenship Education of Russell Sage College, directed by Stephen Schechter. The civic education experiences of Latvians in the United States have been supported by the United States Information Agency (USIA) and the United States Department of Education.

The DAC is a member of Civitas: An International Civics Education Exchange Program, coordinated by the Center of Civics Education and funded by the United States Department of Education with support from the USIA and its United States Information Service (USIS) offices in former communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe. In particular the USIS personnel in Riga, Latvia, have been very supportive of the DAC and have aided its work in many ways. They have been especially helpful in enabling scholars and educators from the United States to conduct activities practically and effectively in partnership with the DAC and other Latvian colleagues. The USIS personnel have provided simultaneous bilingual translations to enable meaningful discussions of ideas between Americans and Latvians, guidance in avoiding cultural insensitivity and conflict, books and documents on Latvian history and government, and the use of meeting rooms at the American Center in Riga to conduct various kinds of civic education meetings and workshops.

The USIS personnel in Riga have greatly assisted the Social Studies Development Center (SSDC) of Indiana University in its collaboration with the DAC. This partnership of Latvia's DAC and Indiana University's SSDC is a component of Civitas: An International Civic Education Exchange Program. The SSDC, led by John Patrick, is the primary American site in the Civitas

program partnership with DAC. The secondary American site is the "We the People..." program of Illinois led by Patton Feichter and Alice Horstman. The American primary and secondary site leaders have organized exchange programs involving visits by Latvian civic educators to Indiana and Illinois and visits by their American counterparts to Latvia. Americans and Latvians have enhanced one another's capacities as civic educators through joint participation in seminars, workshops, classroom observations and demonstrations, curriculum development activities, and cultural enrichment activities. Further, since 1995, John Patrick has been a consultant for the DAC in its curriculum development and teacher training activities.

In 1997, the DAC and the SSDC jointly developed and published a book for civics teachers in Latvia: *Civic Education for Democracy in Latvia: Principles, Practices, and Resources for Teachers*. The book's developers were Guntars Catlaks, formerly head of DAC, Daina Bara, professor of political science at the University of Latvia, and John J. Patrick. Published in Latvian language, this book includes key documents on government, law, and citizenship plus guides to resources in libraries, archives, and on the World Wide Web or Internet. It also contains short essays by Catlaks, Bara and Patrick and others on principles and practices of civic education and democracy. This book is designed for use in professional development workshops and pre-service teacher education programs in Latvia.

The Latvian participants in Civitas have collaborated with the American partner, the SSDC, to develop lessons on the constitution and parliamentary democracy of Latvia. These lessons have been made available to American high school students and teachers of government. They enable Americans to compare their democratic institutions with those of another country.

In addition to its American partnerships, the DAC has cooperated since 1995 with various

European organizations, such as Institute of Curriculum Development at Enschede, Netherlands. Using Dutch examples, teaching materials in social studies have been developed and tried out in twenty schools. Civic educators from other European countries such as Poland, Estonia, the United Kingdom, Lithuania, and Russia have also cooperated with the DAC. Finally, the DAC has participated in the Phare Democracy Program of the Council of Europe.

The DAC's international partnerships have taught participants important cross-cultural lessons about reciprocity, mutual understanding, cultural diversity, and human communality. Both Latvians and Americans in Civitas: An International Civic Education Program have learned the benefits of a two-way flow of knowledge and opinions about democracy and civic education. Latvian participants in Civitas, for example, have learned the American perspective on constitutional limits in democracy that protect rights of individuals and minority groups against the threat of the tyranny of the (democratic) majority. By contrast, Americans have learned the Latvian perspective on parliamentary democracy, which strongly emphasizes participation by citizens to hold the government accountable to the country's civic standards. This kind of exchange enriches understanding of viable cultural variations on the principles and practices of democracy. The exchange of knowledge and opinions has also generated classroom lessons that teach Latvian students the principle of constitutionalism in democratic governance more effectively and that illuminate for American students parliamentary and participatory alternatives to their own democratic traditions.

Civitas, through its emphasis on cross-cultural reciprocity, enhances mutual understanding and respect for political and civic diversity among American and Latvian participants. But it also increases their appreciation of human communality. Both Americans and Latvians in Civitas have

become more aware of their common needs across cultures for government by consent of the governed as the surest means to their common desire for liberty.

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